
Opening Doors with a Degree in English

John Banschbach

A few years ago, a student came to my office with a question about careers. She had been a student in one of my general education courses, and was intelligent and interested in literature. She was deciding on a major and wanted to know, “What doors would a degree in English open for me?” But I did not have a ready, responsible answer, one that would give her both a sense of specific career possibilities and a clear sense of how to achieve them. Fortunately, she was interested in teaching English at the post-secondary level, and I, with a sense of relief, sent her to the department’s director of graduate studies.

Her question remains an important one. It is not uncommon for English departments to have webpages with titles like “What can I do with a degree in English?” There will be a list of dozens of occupations, including not only the obvious ones like “author,” “teacher,” and “editor,” but also less obvious ones like “lobbyist” and “special events coordinator” (the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, <http://www.uncwil.edu/stuaff/career/Majors>), or “college development specialist” and “energy communications specialist” (the University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/careers/english.pdf>). And often there will be a discussion of English as a “pre-professional major”: for example, “A major in English can be good preparation for continued graduate or professional

training in areas such as English, law, political science/government, public administration, psychology, counseling, communications, and religious studies (i.e., seminary)” (the University of Kentucky, <http://career.utk.edu/students/majors.asp>).

These three sites alone list over 150 occupations and professions that a degree in English is preparation for. The implication is that the skills that English majors develop in reading, writing, analysis, and research are so broadly applicable that English majors are qualified to do any kind of work where these skills are important. So the student confronts an almost bewildering array of possible careers, and both the student and prospective employers have difficulty seeing the connection between a degree in English and a career as an “insurance agent” or as a “policy and procedures analyst.”

A recent study of U.S. Department of Education surveys provides some simplification and some guidance for students majoring in English and for those who advise them. David Laurence, editor of *ADE Bulletin*, reports on the results of the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates. About four percent of the 100,000 graduates surveyed were English majors; of these, three-fourths were employed, with only three percent unable to find employment. The variety of the occupations that the graduates reported being employed in partly validates the “What can I do with a degree in English” websites. There are about sixty job categories reported, including “engineers and scientists,” “farmers,” “labor relations specialists,” and “architects.” But fully fifty percent of the jobs are in four areas: education, communications (“artists, broadcasters, editors, entertainers, public relations”), marketing and sales, and law. And, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, the job outlook in all of these areas for the next several years is favorable (<http://www.bls.gov/oco>).

Unfortunately, the clarity that the data in the preceding paragraph provides about likely careers for English majors is muddled by reports about the economy in the next few decades. Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley has said that many of the employment opportunities that will be in the “top 10 jobs” in the near future do not yet exist (cited in Augustine). And the

skills in demand will change also. Studies of the twenty-first century workforce argue for the “growing importance of cognitive skills in the workplace,” that jobs will increasingly entail “nonroutine problem-solving and complex communication tasks,” will require “nonroutine skills, such as those requiring flexibility, creativity, problem solving, and complex communications,” and will demand “the capacity for abstraction to make sense of patterns and symbols, the ability to view problems in the context of complex systems” (Karoly 109-111).

Another study, *Tough Times or Tough Choices*, is direr and more direct. In the near future, jobs in the United States that are routine, even complex routine jobs like the pricing of airline seats or the designing of sails for sailboats, will either be done by machine or by highly educated people in less developed countries (20-21). The work in this country that will pay well—the only work that will do so—will be creative, and will require a different kind of ordinary education: “Strong skills in English, mathematics, technology, and science, as well as literature, history, and the arts will be essential for many; beyond this, candidates will have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well organized, able to learn very quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt quickly to frequent changes in the labor market” (9).

As Richard Riley implies, universities somehow need to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, and *Tough Times or Tough Choices* is finally an argument for a new model of the country’s educational system. But I am struck by the appropriateness of the English major for the world of work that these studies foresee. Students who major in English learn, through the study of literature, not only to understand and express complex ideas, but to read and write rhetorically, understanding the interaction of ideas and purpose and audience. When students write literary research papers—a very specialized kind of writing—they are, in the process, developing the more general abilities of thinking critically and creatively and of solving nonroutine problems. They must accurately interpret and evaluate the arguments of

others on the literary work that is their topic. And the essence of such writing is creative synthesis, seeing connections among elements of the literary work that no one else has seen.

Students who major in English have much to offer. We need to help students who major in our discipline understand what they have to offer now and the careers in which their abilities will most easily be recognized. But, if these and other studies are at all correct, we also need to help them understand the nature of the economy they will spend their adult years in, and what they have to offer then, so that they are ready to open other doors when they finally appear.

Works Cited

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